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Review Essay: Gender and Sexuality in Contemporary Cuba

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Review Essay: Gender and sexuality in contemporary Cuba.

Book review of:

ALLEN, JAFARI S. *¿Venceremos? The Erotics of Black Self-Making in Cuba*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2011. 256 p. ISBN: 0822349507 (paperback), 9780822349501 (paperback).

HAMILTON, CARRIE. *Sexual Revolutions in Cuba: Passion, Politics, and Memory*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2012. 320 p. ISBN: 9780807835197 (cloth), 9781469618913 (paperback).

STOUT, NOELLE M. *After Love: Queer Intimacy and Erotic Economies in Post-Soviet Cuba*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2014. 248 p. ISBN: 9780822356851 (paperback), 9780822356738 (cloth).

Sexuality has been a central topic in ethnographic studies on Cuba during the last few years. The majority of the literature has focused on sexual exchanges between Cubans and foreigners in the context of the struggling post-Soviet economy. While most of the earlier works discussed heterosexual relations, recently same-sex relationships have received particular attention, probably due to the Cuban revolution's troubled history with sexual minorities. These three volumes all examine sexuality and intimacy in post-revolutionary Cuba from an intersectional approach—studying sexuality in conjunction with social class, gender, race and generational differences.

Through a focus on subjectivity, agency, resistance and black Cubans' 'self-making', Jafari Allen highlights gender, sexuality and race as sites for understanding post-Soviet Cuba's current transformations. He argues that self-making draws on Cubans' desire for a 'larger freedom' (p. 2), as well as on global influences and interaction with foreigners. For Allen, this larger freedom centres on the erotic, defined as carrying significant transcendent and transformative political potential. The erotic is also a site of knowledge production that offers resistance to the 'state and received culture' (p. 192). However, Allen's notion of Cuba's freedom differs from many other US definitions and includes pushing the revolutionary project further rather than rejecting it all together. For Allen's research subjects, a larger freedom would mean a more inclusive *communitas* of welfare for all.

He criticises the Cuban revolution for failing to keep its promises of justice and equality for all, instead reproducing pre-revolutionary gender, racial and sexual hierarchies. Allen argues that the revolution is based on a racialised heteropatriarchy that keeps women at home, forces mothering on them, embraces nuclear families, fails to break long-term gendered practices and imposes compulsory heteronormativity on Cubans. But my ethnography (Härkönen 2014a, 2014b) suggests that daily realities for many Cubans are

more complex. Women are not enclosed in the home and, at least among low-income people, few families are nuclear families. Many Cubans, men and women, genuinely embrace parenthood as central to their life projects and pursue the goal of highlighting gender difference in various daily practices. This should not be brushed away as a mere effect of patriarchy but rather should call for an understanding of the cultural logics, meanings and values behind such processes.

Allen emphasises individual desire as the site for change and new forms of politics, consciousness and pleasure, whilst simultaneously paying attention to the material struggles that many Cubans experience in the new post-Soviet economy. Allen remains optimistic about Cuba's on-going changes and sees them offering marginalised subjects new possibilities and forms of self-making. While the theoretical focus on the individual self somewhat disturbs me—the Cubans that I know lead highly relational lives—Allen manages to avoid the pitfalls of the most blatant forms of individualism and does emphasise the meaning of love, sexuality and friendship to his research subjects, although rejecting such relationships as the family, which are highly significant for many Cubans. *Venceremos* is nevertheless a beautifully written in-depth ethnography on contemporary Cuba.

While Allen's emphasis is on the changes brought about by the post-Soviet period, Carrie Hamilton's book examines sexuality in Cuba since the strict regime of the early revolution to present-day discussions of sex work and same-sex relationships. She is a historian and relies on life history interviews with heterosexual and non-heterosexual men and women of different ages to create a comprehensive account of Cuban sexuality since 1959.

By paying attention to gender relations, love, sexuality, domestic arrangements and people's perceptions of the revolutionary regime, Hamilton traces Cubans' experiences of sexuality throughout four decades of changing revolutionary policies. The book offers plenty of new information on sexuality at different points of revolutionary history, a topic on which there has been little earlier information.

Hamilton argues that she wants to challenge 'Cuban exceptionalism' through emphasising the continuing influence of pre-revolutionary understandings on contemporary sexuality (p. 233), stating that such issues as 'machismo' (p. 111) and 'traditional' gender roles continue to define contemporary Cuba (p. 79, 232). On the basis of Chapter 3, I understand her definition of 'traditional' as referring to a patriarchal nuclear family model with roots in Cuba's history as a colony of Spain. Nevertheless, it is questionable how common this model has ever been, especially among racially mixed, lower income Cubans, taking into account the long-term influence of matrifocal kinship in the Caribbean area. As an anthropologist, I would have preferred a more reflexive methodological approach to the ethnographic material. For instance, interviews on intimate topics that, in my view, require mutual trust and long-term engagement with one's research participants were conducted by various different persons and not by the author herself. Sometimes Hamilton's use of terms is confusing: for instance, when she discusses marriage, which I understand as referring to legal marriage. However, in Cuba, *casarse* (to marry) can mean anything from a one night stand to legal marriage and at times I felt that there was some confusion on whether her respondents really meant marriage in the Anglo-American sense. This leads to a heightened emphasis on legal marriage,

whereas, for instance, my own racially mixed, low-income research subjects did not care for marriage at all. The book is sensitive to gender and sexual orientation (see especially Chapter 6), but would have profited from a more nuanced discussion of passion, love and affect as culturally and historically specific. At times it feels as if Hamilton sees issues such as heterosexual female sexuality and inter-racial love relationships as more rigid than they are in practice which may be partly due to Hamilton's interview methodology, as subjects such as female infidelity, for instance, often do not feature in taped interviews. While Hamilton pays attention to the silent moments in her interviews, the account would have benefitted from a more comprehensive attention to contextually shifting meanings and values. This highlights the importance of in-depth ethnographic research for understanding gender and sexuality. Still, Hamilton's account will provide a useful source of information for researchers interested in gender, sexuality and socialist state policies in Cuba for years to come.

Noelle Stout presents a rich ethnographic description of queer life in post-Soviet Cuba, with an emphasis on the ways in which Cuba's large-scale changes have transformed intimacy. These developments have produced new opportunities for the individual, but also difficult struggles with poverty, an increased commodification of sex and affect, and doubts about people's motives in relationships. Stout's attention centres on the introduction of forms of capitalism to Cuba along with tourism and the effects of the tourism industry on queer intimacy (love and sex). Her research participants include gays, lesbians, sex workers and *travestis*. Through a focus on three households, she examines the lives of three particular groups of people: working-class and middle-class urban gays and lesbians, gay men who hire sex workers, and male and female sex workers. Stout also examines the perspective of foreign gay sex tourists visiting Havana. She argues that to understand queer social life in contemporary Cuba, researchers have to 'remain sensitive to unique trajectories of Cuban sexual equality' (p. 30). Stout herself stays attentive to the nuances, ambiguities and contradictions in people's relationships.

Stout gives a detailed, reflexive account of her own role and troubles during fieldwork, which is one of the particular strengths of book. As a scholar working in Cuba, I recognise many of the fears and doubts that Stout describes in contexts where trust is sometimes very fragile, though Stout's subject matter probably made her encounters more fleeting and loaded with doubts about material interest than, for instance, the experiences I had with my own long-term Cuban research participants. *After Love* leaves one with a feeling that capitalism has pervaded most aspects of social relationships, and that material interests are ubiquitous in queer social life in contemporary Cuba. Stout states that with the turbulent landscape of post-Soviet Havana, 'new values of possessive individualism gained momentum over what many gays described as a previous focus on social solidarity' (p. 172). According to her research, many people felt that the post-Soviet era poverty undermines the benefits of increasing tolerance for sexual diversity. Political-economic forces have transformed erotic subjectivities on the island, causing the emergence of new forms of intimate inequalities that undermine crucial social bonds of sex, love and family. Commodification of sex redefines both personal and public lives in a harmful way, bringing betrayals, violence, a decrease in work ethics and the infusion of relationships with financial motives, thereby reshaping fundamental assumptions about intimacy and equality. As market logics invade intimacy, Stout sees a profound gap between

the ideals and realities of life, love, relationships and the economy in post-Soviet Havana. In practice, however, the boundaries between genuine and strategic affections are constantly blurred and crossed, she remarks.

Stout states that, rather than embracing post-Soviet Cuba's changes and internalising the neo-liberal values of self-management and freedom of consumption, her research participants remained critical of Cuba's new individualism. Despite Cuba's homophobic history, her research subjects drew on state rhetoric concerning diligence and hard work to criticise the influx of neoliberal capitalism, displaying the complex relationship between contemporary state ideologies and urban gays. The critique of commodification of sex and affect in which her research participants engage is a way for urban Cubans to challenge the new inequalities of class and status but, in doing so, they draw on more long-term hierarchies of urban privilege, whiteness and standards of gender conformity. While Stout acknowledges that her research subjects seek to resist the invasion of market logics into their relationships, I am still critical of seeing commodification as being as pervasive to social life in contemporary Havana as Stout portrays. Rather, I suggest paying attention to the complex ways in which materiality intertwines with affect as a way to demonstrate love and care in relationships.

That said, Stout nevertheless remains sensitive to a range of subtle distinctions. She notes generational differences in the ways in which queer Cubans position themselves in relation to post-Soviet changes and emphasises differences among distinct state institutions in relation to issues of non-normative gender and sexuality, as well as the diversity among the gay sex tourists that visit Havana. Stout is perceptive of gender in her account, stating that Cuba's large-scale changes have had differing influences on the lives of gays and lesbians. While questioning heteronormativity, for example, her female participants conformed to gendered ideals on appropriate dress and behaviour for women. Similarly, many sex workers drew on traditional gender roles to position themselves within gendered hierarchies. Staying responsive to subtle differences, Stout provides a nuanced account on transformations in queer intimacy in present-day Havana.

What surprised me in all three of these books was the conservative image used to portray heterosexual—or 'non-queer'—relationships, particularly when it comes to women. Allen sees women as suffering from 'patriarchal control' (p. 114), and Hamilton perceives women as victims of 'traditional' ideas of 'female chastity' (p. 82, 88–89) and 'conventional' (p. 232) sexual mores. Stout, on the other hand, writes how her research subjects do not conform to the 'traditional standards of middle class respectability common throughout the Caribbean, such as middle-class propriety and sexual decorum' (p. 174). Such accounts differ from my own fieldwork experience among low-income, racially mixed heterosexual Cubans. While it may be that because of their race and economic position, my research participants do not conform to notions of bourgeois respectability, I am yet to meet any Cuban who embraced the ideals portrayed in these three accounts as 'traditional'. It is possible that a focus on non-normative sexuality—along with the methodological complexities related to Hamilton's interview material on heterosexual Cubans—creates a more restricted picture of normative sexuality than the lived everyday reality of many Cubans.

Nonetheless, all of these books are captivating and engage with individuals' experiences of love, sexuality and economic troubles in contemporary Cuba in a way that takes us past

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state politics and official rhetoric to examine the interplay between people's day-to-day realities and the country's large-scale structural changes. Such a perspective is a welcome addition to Cuban studies and of importance to anyone interested in Latin America and the Caribbean, sexuality, subjectivity, race, gender, love and the interplay among structural, cultural and social change. In the midst of its current political and economic developments, Cuba provides a particularly intriguing context for ethnographic inquiries.

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